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ABSTRACT

An ethnographic study was conducted (1) to describe the interaction between students and teacher during reading lessons and the meanings these interactions have for both, and (2) to develop an understanding of how schooling contributes to the reproduction of social inequalities. The study involved daily observations of the ten third, fourth, and fifth grade upper middle class students enrolled in a five-week summer remedial reading program and their teacher. In addition, it involved informal interviews with the teacher and students and more formal interviews with the school's principal and the students' former teachers. The major conclusion of the study was that reading remediation did not occur to any great extent during the program. The observed lessons focused on language arts skills, with a heavy emphasis on written work with synonyms, antonyms, facts, and main ideas of a story. Little oral reading was observed. It appeared that remediation was not taking place because the students were deficient in many skills demanded by the tasks assigned them. They were asked to look up words they could not pronounce, to identify main characters and ideas in stories they could not read, and to read books beyond their reading levels. The study suggested that the teacher, who felt constrained by the need to cover skill areas listed by the students' former teachers, and the students, who felt they must do what the teacher assigned, and parents collaborated in socially constructing reading lessons doomed to failure. (FL)

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The Social Construction of Reading Lessons: Insights into Social Reproduction*

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The Social Construction of Reading Lessons:

Insights Into Social Reproduction

The genesis of this paper derives from two sets of concerns. The first involves the fact that McDermott (1977:154) identifies:

> Although there are many correlational studies of the effects on reading test scores of decontextualized social variables such as race, social class, and personality, ethnographic descriptions of reading behavior are rare.

The issues raised herein are thus based upon ethnographic research, which is informed by sociological traditions of phenomenology (Blumer, 1976; Schultz, 1932) and symbolic interaction (Mead, 1934). These theoretical traditions, as Sharp and Green (1975:viii) note,

> Reaffirm the significance of human action, and see social structural formations (e.g., schools) as the dynamic creations of subjects who, through a continuous process of interpretation and negotiation, make and remake their social worlds.

That is, there is a need to conceive of "teaching and learning as intersubjective construction of reality" (Esland, 1971:78). The first concern, then, leads us to an attempt to describe not only the process of interaction between students and a teacher but also, the meanings these interactions have for them (see also King, 1978; Mehan, 1979). As indicated in the title of this paper we seek to illuminate how reading lessons are socially constructed.

The second concern which gives rise to this paper involves the issue of understanding how schooling contributes to the reproduction of social inequalities. This macro-level, social structural concern with how existing inequalities in wealth and power are reinforced (and sometimes challenged) by the allocation and ideological functions of education systems, however, should not be seen as divorced from the micro-level concern mentioned first. While attempting to examine connections between macro-

micro-levels is not facile, it is critical, as Apple (1978:497) stresses:

> To combine ethnographic insights about the ways meanings and symbols are created, supported, and controlled with a more historical and structural appraisal of the dialectical linkages between everyday life in schools and an unequal society.

Context and Participants

To address the two concerns outlined above, an ethnographic study was conducted focusing upon ten 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade students and their teacher during a five-week remedial reading summer school program in 1980. The program was organized in a seven year old open-concept elementary school, which during the regular school year accommodated approximately 850 students. The school occupied a pine-treed, four block area and was built in the center of a suburban subdivision in the Houston metropolitan area.

The families in the neighborhood, constituting the catchment area for the school were predominantly white and upper middle class. According to information obtained from the Southern Evaluation Report on this school, 53% of the parents had attained at least one college degree, with an additional 29% having attended but not completed college. Many of the fathers were employed in mid-management positions with oil companies. (The population is thus perhaps similar to that characterized by Anyon (1981) in the "Affluent Professional School" she studied.) The principal described the parents in the area as extremely interested in the academic progress of their children and generally supportive of the school, the principal and the teachers. The principal noted, however, that generally parents were also quick to communicate to school staff their concerns regarding academic programs and the progress of their children.

The eight male and two female (two Asian and eight Anglo) children and their teacher were involved in a "Summer Tutorial Program," advertised in a letter sent to parents in Spring, 1980, as "providing remedial help at a reasonable cost ($50) for those

students working below grade level." On the basis of SRA Reading Test grade equivalent scores and/or assessment by their previous teachers, the youngsters were defined as reading at a level from one-half to two years below their grade. (This should be contrasted with the average reading scores of students in the school being approximately one year above grade level.) The students were in the summer school program as a result of teacher recommendation and/or parental request. Not all of the participating students had been recommended for remedial work and not all of those recommended for participation were signed up by their parents. It should be noted, finally, that one of the children in the group was attending the summer session for remediation in mathematics, but was accommodated in the reading class because of his difficulty in attending the math class later in the morning.

The teacher, who agreed to work with the nine students in reading and one in math during the five weeks of two-hour sessions, had twelve years of elementary teaching experience. During the previous year, she had worked with 5th graders, including one "lower achieving" group and one "higher achieving" group. She had recently become certified for work with gifted and talented students. She had been involved with such a group as part of her responsibilities in the previous year and anticipated (favorably) that she would be working solely with "intellectually gifted" students the following year. The principal described this teacher as highly respected for her teaching ability. It should be noted that the teacher had some serious financial problems - she indicated that she took the summer school job mainly for the money - and was experiencing health-related difficulties which were exacerbated by the extreme heat and humidity of summer.

The first author of this paper attended each of the 24, two-hour class sessions, taking extensive field notes in shorthand. Informal discussions were held almost daily with students and/or the teacher. In addition, more formal, semi-structured interviews

were conducted with each child, the teacher, the principal, and the students' teachers from the previous year.

Findings

One of the major conclusions of the research effort (see Malmstad, 1980, for other details) is that reading remediation did not take place to any great extent during the five-week session. The lessons that were observed involved a focus on "language arts skills" with a heavy emphasis on written work with synonyms, antonyms, facts and ideas, main ideas of a story. Very little oral reading was done; in fact, on many days none was done at all. On the basis of the assumption that reading remediation must be focused where the breakdown in a child's skills occurs, reading remediation was not taking place because the children were deficient in many of the more basic skills demanded by such lessons. Students were asked to look up in the dictionary words they could not pronounce, and use these words in sentences. They were asked to identify main characters and main ideas of stories composed of many words they could not adequately read. Even the book, The Black Pearl, intended for pleasure reading for the students did not appear to be appropriately used. It was given to all students, regardless of the fact that their reading levels ranged from 2nd to 4th grade.

The circumstances described above may or may not be typical, but the question of interest here is why they occurred. One possible explanation would be that the teacher involved was at fault for the material selected, organized, and presented the material during the summer school sessions. The teacher appeared to admit her lack of success when she commented to the researcher at the end of the first full week of class sessions:

> I wonder if these kids are really getting anything out of it. Sometimes I think it's far too advanced for them.

One might argue that not only did the teacher fail to perform effectively her role as a teacher, but even at times "camouflaged an unresponsive class with a lesson directed to phantom audiences" (McDermott, 1977:158). Regardless of how each day's session went, the teacher ended each day having class members say what they had "learned" (i.e., been presented) that day and then she would say something such as "You've been a real good class today." Moreover, this camouflaging was directed toward a wider audience. At the end of the five-week period, the teacher sent home a "Happy Gram" with only positive comments on it as well as an attached list of skills, which had been presented (though not necessarily acquired by the student) in class. Some insight into the teacher's thinking in this matter is indicated in the following interchange between the teacher and researcher which occurred during the fourth week of the sessions:

Teacher: I don't know what's wrong with him today.

Researcher: I'm wondering if maybe the reading level is above him; he surely seems to be having difficulty with the words.

Teacher: I'm sure that's true. But no matter what, I'm not going to tell his parents. Why get them all upset as they'd only take it out on him. He's going to be moving anyhow, and now he'll have something to take home and show them what he's done. I'd really like to help him but there's just not enough time.

We would argue, however, that an explanation based solely in terms of an ineffective teacher would in this and most situations be an over-simplification. The account must extend beyond the actions and thoughts of one person. There is a need to consider the broader organizational as well as political economic context in which the teacher was situated (see also Apple, 1979:58). Such an analysis would go beyond merely pointing to the not insignificant impact of the health-related and personal financial problems the teacher was experiencing. These problems clearly reduced the

amount of time and energy the teacher had available to select, organize, and present materials, but such an explanation is scarcely sufficient. Also, it is not sufficient to offer an explanation focusing on the economic-related constraint of one teacher working in a tutorial situation with one student in math and nine students who vary considerably in their age and reading "ability."

One source of a more complete explanation lies in how the students perceived and reacted to the lessons the teacher organized to present. During individual interviews, the students generally told the researcher that they hoped to become better readers during the summer school program. Many of them criticized, however, that the class sessions as organized were not helping them to do so.

Researcher: Is this summer school class really helping you to read better?

Darren: It's helping me to write, too.

Researcher: Well, what are you here for, do you think - to write or read?

Darren: To read, and we should read more!

Researcher: How should you read more - out loud or silently?

Darren: Both, but out loud helps most. Our class looks like a language and spelling class instead of a reading class, cuzz in language class you do mostly writing.

Researcher: Do you have any suggestions for what could be done to improve summer school?

Joe: I think teachers should be doing language arts in regular school and not in summer school.

Researcher: You said your main reading problem was reading out loud. Has this class helped you with this?

Sara: Well, we don't do very much (reading out loud) in here. Mostly we read to ourselves, but I read to my mother out loud every night. I'd like to have more reading out loud here.

Sara's comments indicate that what parents do also must be included in an account of how the reading lessons were socially constructed. Parents are implicated firstly because as in Sara's case, they seem to devote considerable time to working with their child on reading.

Researcher: What do your parents think about what you are doing in summer school?

Peter: Mother says practice on working harder. She gives me work at home to do too, like on vocabulary words.

Researcher: What are you telling your parents about summer school?

Jerry: All my parents want is for me to get better at reading. They are supporters and are helping me. If I have homework, sometimes they'll answer my questions. So sometimes I think my parents are better teachers than at school.

Although she might not agree with Jerry's assessment, the teacher seemed to expect such parental tutoring, at least in the case of Charles, who was supposed to be receiving remediation in mathematics. On several occasions, the teacher told him things like: "You're going to need a lot of help from your mother."

Parents were also involved in that some of their children communicated their dissatisfaction with their experience in the summer school sessions but, in contrast to what the principal said was the norm, none of them contacted the school to follow up on these criticisms.

However, not all of the students expressed their dissatisfaction with their school experience. Some seemed to assist the teacher in camouflaging the fact that they were not receiving appropriate remedial reading help.

Researcher: Do you think you can now read better?

Dan: Well, maybe a little bit better.

Researcher: Do you think you are getting enough practice in reading?

Dan: No, because we have more written work...

Researcher: What do you tell your parents you do in the class?

Dan: They usually don't ask anything, but sometimes they do, and I say we read and do written work.

Researcher: What do you tell your parents about summer school?

Jim: Some days we read a whole lot and other days we do board work. They say, "That's okay."

At least a partial understanding of the reasons behind such camouflaging activity is indicated below:

Researcher: Have you ever told your mother this, that you write more than you read?

Darren: No, cuz I hate when my mother calls up and says something like there's too much writing and not enough reading...

While some of the students complained about the summer school program to their parents, none of them verbalized such criticism directly to the teacher. Why this did not occur was clarified by some of the children.

Researcher: Have you considered talking to the teacher about this - having her hear each student read on a one-to-one basis with her?

Jerry: No, I don't want to get in trouble. That's one thing I really don't want!

Students' camouflaging of the lack of appropriate reading remediation extended to their interaction with the teacher as well. The excerpt from field notes (below) suggest how the students' camouflaging efforts are intertwined with those of the teacher.

Teacher: What do you think I'm going to write on your "Happy Gram" about summer school?

Students: (No response.)

Teacher: Do you think I'm going to write all bad things? How many of you think you are doing pretty good in here?

Students: (A few hands are raised.)

Teacher: How many think this has been good for you?

Students: (All students raise their hands except Darren, who sits and smiles.)

Teacher: I think I see almost every hand. I think this session has been very, very good for all of you, and I'm real pleased with your work in here... I want you to know you are working very hard.

Two students (Darren and Joe) did appear to communicate to the teacher that the lessons were not appropriate. But they did so through their actions rather than with words. They engaged in what we termed an "overtly disruptive" strategy for coping with the classroom situation. These students made little attempt to do the tasks which were assigned. They constantly interrupted the teacher while she was working with other students and often distracted and sometimes irritated their peers. For example, Joe, who had an allergy problem, would poke in a "playful" manner at other students seated near him, walk around the class in a "strutting" or "marching" fashion, blow his nose in an excessively loud way, and wad up the used tissue and shoot it like a basketball into a wastebasket. When asked why he blew his nose so frequently, Joe replied: "Well, that's a hard question to answer. I guess I do if for both reasons - because I have to and because sometimes I just do it.

These "statements of dissatisfaction" were not interpreted as such by either the teacher or the other students. This was partly because, according to the principal and other teachers interviewed, both children had previously established a reputation as a source of disruption. (See Hargreaves, et al., 1975, for a useful discussion on the genesis and ramifications of such reputations.) Since the other students didn't verbalize or act out their criticism of the class, Joe's and Darren's behavior could easily (at least for the teacher) be attributed to individual children's problems rather than to institutional ones.

The other students helped sustain a sense that things were "going well" by engaging in coping strategies which provided no direct challenge to what went on in the classroom. Six of the students engaged in a coping strategy we termed "nondisruptive behavior." For example, one morning Wong was told to read silently his library book. When he advised the teacher he had already "read" the book, he was told to keep reviewing it. He did this, quietly, without any additional comments, for approximately one hour, until he was given an additional assignment. As another example, during one class session Jerry, Jim and Dan gave the teacher answers to questions she asked about what they had "read." They continued in this manner, drawing upon information they already knew, despite the fact that they had not been able to glean the answers as they struggled to "read" the assignment.

These six students seemed to reinforce the notion that class sessions were successful by establishing what Sharp and Green (1975) label a "bedrock of busyness." The impact of activity, regardless of the outcomes it produces, is expressed by the teacher. She explained that although she suspected a more elementary approach to reading (e.g., the use of a phonics approach to strengthening decoding skills) would be more helpful, she would not change her lesson plans. Rather she would put more written work on the board for them to do as "that usually keeps them busy." On another occasion the following conversation took place:

Researcher: Do you think the students have gained by being here this summer?

Teacher: That's hard to say. But I suppose it's better than nothing. It probably kept them in the routine, but I don't really know if they learned anything.

Being busy also seemed to be the basis the principal used to evaluate the teaching-learning process, as the excerpt below from field notes indicates:

> At 8:35 a.m., the principal enters the gym room where the summer school session is being held. She smiles, and nods at the teacher at the opposite end of the gym from this area, walks across to where the researcher is sitting, leans down and says: "It looks like everything is going well." The principal leaves without sitting down to observe, having been in the area for about two minutes.

The two other visits made by the principal during the five weeks (probably more frequent than normal because of the presence of the researcher) were similar. The positive comments seemed to be directed toward the fact that (on these occasions) the students were quiet and (at least appeared to be) working on material written on the board for them. The principal made no attempt to observe the quality of the products of the students' "busyness."

While two other students (Peter and Charles) were quiet, their coping strategies were different from the six employing a mostly "nondisruptive behavior" strategy. These two adopted a strategy we refer to as "covertly disruptive." (The contrast between this strategy and the "overtly disruptive" are discussed above is analogous to Anyon's (1981) distinction between "passive" and "active" forms of resistance.) Although not really "busy" with work, the two exemplifying a "covertly disruptive" coping strategy might appear to do so except if one observed them at length. The strategy did not disturb the teacher or other students, but also did not involve any attempt to do the work, which was apparently too difficult. For example, on one day when Peter did not understand the work he was supposed to do, he did not request additional clarification.

Rather he just sat quietly, staring into space, and intermittently flipped through the pages of a book though not actually reading.

In addition to the teacher, the students, their parents, and the principal, we must consider the role played by other teachers in the social construction of the reading lessons. The teacher points to their involvement when she was discussing with the researcher why she organized and presented her lessons as she did. She stated that she felt there was a better way of doing it and that this was very frustrating to her. "But I'm not going to rock the boat. If this is what they want, this is what I'll do." The list of "skills" and "objectives," from which she devised her summer school lessons, had been given to her by the students' former teachers. She said she felt compelled to work on these skills, despite having serious reservations about them being too advanced. (For a similar finding see Barr and Duffy, 1978.)

It is important to note, however, that these lists appeared to have been ritualistically constructed by these teachers at the directive of district administrators using the results of end-of-year reading progress tests. Whether because of time constraints or because there was a perceived need to signal that students had made progress during the year, the list of skills tended to be limited to more advanced "reading" skills. Of course, it is not surprising that students with difficulties in more basic reading skills would have been diagnosed on the progress test (administered in a written mode) as having "deficiencies" in skill areas such as predictions, main ideas, outlining, encyclopedia skills, and types of literature. But this brings us back to the issue of why the curriculum selected, organized and presented by the teacher in the summer school sessions was not successful in facilitating reading remediation.

Discussion

What we conclude from our analysis of the ethnographic data is that the teacher, the students, their parents, the principal, and other staff members collaborated (however

unwittingly) in socially constructing lessons which did not satisfactorily remediate students' reading skill deficiencies. Thus far, we have illustrated the sources of explanation for this collaboration at the level of the individual, classroom and school. For example, we noted the teacher's financial and health-related problems, her perception of the need to work from the prescribed list of skills, and her preference not to burden parents or their children with news of the lack of success. We saw the parents resist the temptation to contact the school and work with their children to supplement what was supposed to be learned in school. We observed the principal engaging in cursory inspections and the other teachers ritualistically providing a list of advanced skills in which the students were deemed deficient. We also noted the students' fear of getting into trouble at school or at home as well as their various coping strategies, most of which did not challenge the legitimacy of the process of schooling in which they were involved.

These findings raise some interesting issues related to our second concern identified in the introduction: How schooling contributes to social reproduction. This is particularly the case because of the upper middle class population involved. Much work focusing on issues of social reproduction (e.g., Grace, 1978; Sharp and Green, 1975; Willis, 1977) has been done among working class populations, but as Anyon (1981) clearly illustrates, there is rich data at all levels of the class structure.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977:99) draw attention to one of the contradictions imbedded in an education system's contribution to social reproduction. They argue that the process of schooling "presupposes and consecrates" what they term "cultural capital" (e.g., a particular way of relating to language and knowledge) "without ever expressly demanding it and without methodically transmitting it." In the school setting described above, you have representatives from a social class who are more likely to possess the "cultural capital" which is "presupposed and consecrated" in school. Members of this social class appear generally to accumulate this cultural capital prior to or outside the

school. But in this case, at least at this moment, the children were not able to invest much of their "cultural capital" because they had problems with some basic reading skills. (Note, however, that parents were seemingly working at home to augment their children's "holdings" in the precious "commodity" of reading skill.) What is interesting is that in this setting the fact that certain basic skills were demanded and not methodically transmitted did not meet active criticism on a larger scale. Such a critique might begin to make more visible how in other aspects of schooling there is an implicit demand for knowledge, world-views, experiences, etc., which are not transmitted in the school.

This is not to argue that no reading skills are ever taught in schools, but only that when they or other less easily identifiable forms of cultural capital are demanded but not offered for acquisition, the education system continues to operate basically without challenge, even from a group of parents described by the principal as not reluctant to confront school personnel.

Part of the ideological constraint for the parents (and perhaps their children) may reside in the meritocratic assumption that schools are legitimate allocators of individuals to economic positions (Bowles and Gintis, 1976). While this assumption is held by members of various social classes, the people in our sample may hold it more firmly because they are members of a class fraction whose own status depends to such a great extent on the legitimacy of educational allocations. With the evidence of classroom work being done (i.e., papers being brought home) it may appear to parents (who, in a sense, need to believe that schools are legitimate allocators) that the "problem" resides with their child. This is indicated by the fact that they worked with their children in reading at home. Such parental efforts may, of course, enable their children to improve their reading skills. But the source of this progress may be attributed to the schooling (rather than the parenting) process, especially since it will likely be at school where the progress is certified by the results of standardized tests.

Futhermore, one needs to examine the assumptions of the legitimacy of standardized tests, one of which was used to identify the students' reading skill deficiencies. It may be that the teacher's comment about not "rocking the boat" may refer to more than just the issue of colleague relations. It may allude to the boat framed in positivism and a form of rationality (Habermas, 1976) which allows the results derived from such a test to be accepted uncritically. Both parents in this community and educator might be seen to have reasons for having faith in tests as their own status and the work they do depends on an assumption of their validity. For instance, many of them went to college and were likely to have been admitted because of the generalized acceptance of standardized tests as assessments of "ability."

Another aspect of the broader ideological matrix to consider as a possible constraint (and as something that is, in this case, reinforced by human action) involves the individualist conception of the social world. The focus on individuals, along with at least a partial acceptance of the appropriateness of the skills identified by the tests, allowed two of the students to be labelled as "trouble makers" rather than seeing their coping strategies as active resistance to an inappropriate form of pedagogic interaction. And as Apple (1979:134) posits, the labelling of individuals - whether below grade level readers or "trouble makers" - frees educators (and others) "from the more difficult task of examining the institutional and economic context that caused these abstract labels to be placed upon concrete individuals in the first place."

This discussion represents an attempt to draw upon "macro-social categories (to) reveal how the underlying economic and political structures of the larger society influence the 'here and now' ideology and culture that are part of the tissue of every life" (Giroux, 1981:147). It should not be construed as a statement of the inevitability of what was described (see also Anyon, 1981:138). Most of us can see some of the choices of action which could have gone (and often do go) in another direction. This is

not to say that the ideological and structural constraints are easily recognized, let alone overcome. But it is also to say that the struggle is not futile.

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